

Jean Epstein, Poetic Film Theorist

Mayumi Tsukamoto

I. The Context, Sources and Emergence of a Theoretical Foundation for the New Art

Jean Epstein, above all, is one of the pioneers of film theory; thus the review of his work should consider the status of the film experience in the early 20's, the objections to film as an art form, and the cultural factors inspiring or surrounding the author. The French theorist comes from a specific intellectual "milieu" which flourished in the beginning of the century. The vibrant artistic circles known as the French Impressionists and the Avant-Garde encourage the new-born cinema. It is, for most of them, the synthesis of all the arts but progressively becomes identified as an art and becomes powerful because of its capacity to show and create movement.

The Impressionist credo incarnates a known phrase of Schopenhauer's "the world is my representation," which is essential to an understanding of Epstein's viewpoint. The Avant-Garde stimulates artistic innovation and film experimentation, freed from pre-existing rules. These people, saturated by the intellectual background of a European civilization ruled by prefixed values, begin to explore cinematography as a medium of creative emotional expression. Although their aspiration is to free sentiment and imagination, their enthusiasm is quite intellectual. The French Impressionist filmmakers try to give a theoretical legacy to their initiatives of this fielding art. Epstein, in particular, provides a sophisticated intellectual support for the new-born

“anti-intellectual” cinema, as he calls it.

The “milieu” not only recognizes and applauds the “cinématographe” for its revolutionary impact, but considers it to be a machine which can better reveal the present world and its philosophies. For Epstein, the “cinématographe” is the experimental realization of relativity. This modern art, based on mobility and on time-manipulation, is more than an art. Epstein thinks that all the other arts, except poetry, are conditioned either by stasis or by the rational limitative conventions of continuity and causality. In his view, the “cinématographe” is even superior to a science. Epstein believes that sciences merely elaborate abstract laws based on the imaginary.

According to the Impressionists’ thinking, artistic creation is not a representation of physical reality, nor a perceptual construct, but an emotional reflection. This accounts for the influence of famous poets such as Aragon and Cendrars on Epstein’s film theory.

Close friends and other film theorists also exerted a direct influence on Epstein’s film theory. Canudo has already defined film’s ontology as a transformation of reality, and favored the use of closeups and musical structures within film. Canudo’s “Manifesto of the Seven Arts” implies meditation and cinematographic deontology. Both aspects will be reproduced in Epstein’s film theory. Louis Delluc is the first to indicate the notion of “photogénie” as the essential condition for the cinema to become an art. He defines it as the filmic expression and form of the beauty of motion. He also promotes rhythmic editing. They all — Canudo, Delluc and Epstein — have speculated on the profound artistic capabilities of the medium.

In the 20’s, the argument between the defenders of the traditional arts and the pioneers of the cinema has often aroused an idealization of cinematic art and values. When the film theorists present an almost utopian futuristic

perspective of the cinema, they are clearly dissociated from concrete film practice. Thus, their theory is a combination of an ideal cinema with the experienced film forms.

The historical context is determinant. “Machinism” becomes the dominant feature of the early century. Machines come to symbolize in French literature, beginning with Zola, fateful social change and the resulting psychological dislocation. Italian Futurists attribute the speed and excitement of modern life to the machines. The French painter and filmmaker Fernand Léger observes the fragmentation of modern life caused by machines. Unlike Rudolf Arnheim, Epstein welcomes all technical advances of the medium. Epstein presents “cinématographe” metaphorically as a radiograph of the soul, and in another instance, compares it to a time machine. So powerful it is to challenge our conception of the world that Epstein dissociates it from the filmmaker’s contribution. Epstein writes:

The machine technology of civilization allows man an infinite variety of angles of observation. We have no longer a simple, clear, continuous, constant notion of an object. Everything is proportional, the function of a variable, mobile, relative, momentary. To know is a defective verb only conjugated in the conditional tense. Civilization thus allows man to develop a larger contact with the world...but this contact is essentially indirect and mediated.¹

It should be noted that Epstein’s positive attitude toward the mechanical revolution assigns him a missionary role to generate a new universal philosophy. Epstein deals with and criticizes the basic previous philosophies and theories. Heraclitus, Euclid, Aristotle, Copernicus, Galilei, Newton,

Descartes, Spinoza, Kant up to Freud, Minkowski and Eisenstein, are all considered as sources of western reason; Epstein argues that far from decoding reality as rational minds claim to do, they codify its appearances in a fixed system of laws and thus their abstractions conceal the truth. Epstein does not intend to replace them, since reality for him is an appearance evolving within space and time.

The most functional factors of his film theory are: 1) The continuation of Romantic theories of the imagination and their use of an emotional language give roots to Epstein's view of film ontology; 2) The Associationist School of psychology, identifying association to a reproduction of the author's state of mind, motivates the epistemological approach of Epstein's film theory; and 3) His poetic aspirations and concepts (as stated in his early work such as "La Lyrosophie") are the sites of his aesthetic and suggestions of artistic film forms and techniques.

Epstein's strategy is to provide a theoretical foundation for the new art. I will examine how he proceeds.

II. The Film Theory of Epstein

Epstein defines cinema as the art of movement and as an experience of emotional cognition. He postulates that cinematic reality is an impression. First of all, we should examine his conception of reality. Reality is complex, variable relative materiality (life), immateriality (light-energy) and essence (sentiment-idea), spacially located and determined by its movement within time.

"Today the reality of space and time, of determinism or freedom, of materiality or spirit, of continuity or discontinuity of the universe loses its precision, its consistency, its necessity and tends to become a conditional

reality.”²

Then he synthesizes reality in a prematerial-material-postmaterial whole, relative to the dimension of time. For Epstein no boundaries exist between continuity and discontinuity, cause and finality, material and spiritual. Reality is multi-dimensional at a time. So he objects to the dualistic antithesis of Idealism versus Materialism. Pure materialism is described as an inheritance of theologic dualism which isolates and opposes soul to life. The relationship of the purity of the spirit and the impurity of the material is the key dogma of different philosophies. Reality as perceived in the classic philosophies, is substantial, related to the being (l'être), and not to the movement within space and time becoming. By presenting philosophies as closed systems having their own interior reality, he defines them as in flux, based on appearances. Everything becomes a question of conception. The change in our way of perceiving reality changes our image of it.

According to Epstein, there are three ways of perceiving reality: through the senses, reason, and mechanical instruments. Our senses falsify reality because they make it appear continuous. The double nature of continuous immateriality (light) and discontinuous materiality (because molecules contain blank spaces) is not perceived by our senses. Thus, sensual reality is a sum of unrealities. The sensible continuity is qualified as a fancy of the human intelligence. Reason also falsifies reality because it is founded on causality, finality and determinism. For instance, Euclidian geometry seems logical and related to the sensual data, but it is just a closed system of perception limited in a human architectural level. He goes further in his criticism, since both fix representations of the world. Reason, by elevating man to the status of the supreme architect, provides a comforting sense of security to the human being. Man has discovered reason in order to substitute

himself for God. But since God does not exist, because he is a self-identified absolute value, without spacial and temporal identification, reason is also a perceptual system of reality condemned to decline. Reason has its roots in sensible reality which becomes a thought, then an idea detached from reality and finally this idea recreates reality in its own way (imaginary) and multiplies it (material products of the human intelligence). Epstein suggests that the scientific constructs claiming generality, universality and a systematic approach to reality reflect more their own mechanism of intelligence, rather than the probabilities of reality. Like Nietzsche, he suggests that science is a kind of fiction while religious dogmas fix an eternal truth, and reason researches the transcendent truth, machines do not bother about the degree of reality or unreality, or the degree of relative or absolute truths; they research the practical, utilitarian truth.

“Cinema does not capture substantial reality. Like any other mechanical philosophy, it is not a being (*être*) and does not experience the passion of living.”³

Reality, as viewed on the screen, has a different nature from reality as perceived in the classic philosophies. It is not substantial, it has a quite metaphysical character (we see what is not there). However, reality is a relative supposition within the limits of our instruments of experimentation. Cinema, experiencing this relativity, is closer to the truth than senses or reason because it does not create an illusion of reality. Cinema is identified by Epstein as a fiction, a transformation of objective reality related to a sentimental state, a dream, or a psychological truth. Cinema does not reflect reality; on the contrary, its representation of the universe has a proper character. Cinema is close to the truth because it is a perception of reality which does not pretend to be objective. Therefore, cinema is opposed to

philosophy.

In this point, we get more familiar with the author's philosophical viewpoint. Epstein disqualifies objectivity by defining it as the interior knowledge of the subject. His entire philosophy is based on the following axiom: the realism of the introspective thought (*pensée introvertie*) and the idealism of the extrospective thought (*pensée extravertie*). Thus, psychological truth is superior to rational truth. This hypothesis is based on the fundamental credo of Relativism: The consciousness of the incapacity to know or to create.

I will try to recapitulate Epstein's philosophy and its effect on his film theory. Man makes an idea of himself and masks reality. The "cinématographe" captures the parts that senses or reason hide. Man wants himself to be the unique measure of the universe. Cinema alters our conception of the world. Reality has an approximative, probable character better reflected by the machine's viewpoint than by the human eye or intellect. The "cinématographe" is an instrument of sensitive and experimental origin. It identifies objects within space and time, which breaks the law of self-identity by interfering with probabilities. It is based on discontinuity (blank spaces between images of film) and does not imply spacial and temporal continuity; thus it breaks the law of visible and rational continuity. Causality appears on screen as a matter of time (the effect of screening the smoke before framing the fire) which breaks the law of causality. The philosophies determine a certain linear finality of life. Cinema breaks the rule since its finality, coinciding with its essence, is movement.

Therefore, cinema experiments with an antiphilosophy within the bounds of Relativism. The philosophic approach to Epstein's film theory is clearly expressed by his belief that cinema is "The Language of the Big Revolt".⁴

III. Original Concepts and Limitations of a Pioneer Film Theorist

In this part I intend to analyze Epstein's approaches, the methods he uses, the models he suggests. The difficulty in discerning his theory is not a sufficient reason for ignoring it. My concern is more to illuminate the author's methodology than to discredit it by using another methodology.

Epstein's approach is a socio-psychological combination, resulting in a model of a premature psycho-semiological attempt, analogous to his poetic model of "Lyrosophie" but definitively different. Stuart Liebman, in his dissertation on Epstein, assimilates the "Lyrosophie" in the cinematographic epistemology, possibly because he studied more deeply the non-cinematic literature of Epstein, rather than his film philosophy. Epstein makes a clear distinction between linguistic art (poetry) and visual language (cinema). In order to interpret poetry (language), the Lyrosophical system uses emotion and reason simultaneously. So the comprehension of a poem is a combined reflection of sentiment and intellect. Cinema, as a visual art, initiates a revolution in human perception, because it only addresses feelings and subconscious cognition. The spectator, freed from reason's limitations (philosophical prejudgements, cultural determinations) is able not only to see more and better, but his whole perception of the world is drastically changed. Cinema does not provide knowledge (implying intellectual process), but rather comprehension (implying emotional process).

Following a sociological approach, Epstein believes that the "machinisme" in advanced industrial societies has caused increasing levels of mental fatigue. In reaction, a poetic state of mind emerges called "Lyrosophie". Epstein's method integrates the psychological theory of the Associationist School (in particular that of Abramowski) by asserting that the mental fatigue releases the rational attention of the spectator and reveals the

emotional and sensual side of higher consciousness. It brings about a non-linguistic, nonrational cognitive state, called subconscious. According to Abramowski, the subconscious is a cognitive mechanism, sometimes defined as an organic process and at other times as a proto-consciousness having its proper laws of similitude and contact; it is also characterized as spontaneous and purposeless. For Epstein it seems to be the last reserve of individual freedom. The subconscious articulates meanings in a different way from the intellect. Based on feelings, it gives a profound, immediate, and definite associative comprehension, whereas rational discourse, by using intelligible words, articulates abstract concepts based on logical rules. Logic itself seems to depend on the grammar of the language. If the rational thinkers exclude emotion, considering it a source of error, Epstein excludes reason, considering it a source of abstract truth. Epstein, admitting the fundamental laws of subconscious cognition (via similitude and contiguity) objects to Freud's theory of the subconscious as a rational mechanism, articulated through the intellect. In Epstein's view, Freud fails to understand the unique function of subconscious. (Freud is causal.)

The Symbolist art theory and the Romantic tradition exert, as well, an influence on Epstein's epistemology. According to these traditions, artistic creation implies that effective processes of mind (positively depicted) function independently of the intellectual processes. Epstein is inspired also by the Romantic definition of the imagination: a union of unconscious and self-conscious (subconscious for Epstein), instinct and intention, freedom and necessity. For Baudelaire, imagination provides objective knowledge (the emotional and associatively profound knowledge of Epstein). Consequently, we can assume that Epstein's epistemology has an imaginative side.

The Lyrosophical model, used in poetry, implying a rational and emotional

synthesis, is not appropriate to the visual language of cinema. Epstein creates a pre-semiological model for cinema analysis. If we dare say, cinema is for Epstein a metaphorical synthesis of visual metaphors, and as visual language it implies an anti-grammatic, anti-syntactic construction. It does not refer to the code of words (indirect signs elaborated by reason) but to images (animated pictures of sensible reality). Epstein elaborates a mini-semiological model without being aware of it: a narrative image is what it offers by itself (but isn't this what we call "signifié" or signifier?) and the Avant-Garde image is what it evokes ("signifiant" or signified).

Epstein also evokes the dream model. A film can be compared to a dream because they both resort to symbols. Both transform the forms, have an inherent time and, in both, man is freed from reason.

His most characteristic model is the cine-poem, where the linking steps between heterogeneous images are suppressed. Against conventional grammatical constructions, the cine-poems are a rhythmic interference of metaphors and analogies. The metaphor is the most intense memory, signifying an interrelationship of all things. Each part mirrors the whole. For Epstein, the essence of cinema is its animism (trees gesticulate with accelerated motion), which breaks the assumed boundaries within nature. The animated image is addressed directly to the spectator's emotional, sentimental state.

Thus, we can conclude that Epstein's cinematic model of epistemology is the subconscious associations that the film imparts to the spectator, who is in a psychological state of chronic fatigue because of his highly industrialized way of life. However, this model is the basic hypothesis of his film theory and also the elementary condition for cinema to be an art. It leaves to the reader to evaluate the original aspects and limitations of Epstein's epistemology. Next

I will examine how the ontology of an art film is depicted.

IV. The General Issues of Film Ontology Leading to a Deontology

The film ontology, as suggested by Epstein, is the cinematic truth. The faculty of expressing it is called “photogénie”. He explains photogenic as those aspects of things, of being and of souls whose moral structure is enhanced by their cinematographic reproduction.⁵ By moral notion he means personality, the authentic essence of the framed object. The fatigue is photogenic because it reveals the animal side of the cerebral man. Cinema shows the world in its nakedness.

The cine-truth is elaborated by metaphors which associate the different dimensions of the universe (material-immaterial). The example of the revolver clarifies the concept of animism best captured by the photogenic function of the “cinématographe”. The revolver is a key object of early American films. Epstein loves it because it represents desires and disappointments depending on context, and it assures a certain kind of individual freedom. Animism, for Epstein, is not a religious conviction, but an exclusion of immobility. Like the revolver association, all metaphors within the film tend to destroy the figurative hierarchies and the substantial barriers of the physical space; therefore cinema emerges as a new perspective, the alienation of movement within time. The “cinématographe” introduces the doubt on the unity and the permanence of identity. The photogenic truth is instantaneous and momentary. In this point, Epstein opens a passage from the cinema ontology to its deontology, which implies imperative and conditional film features.

After having attributed the ontology of film as an art to its use of the fourth dimension of time, which challenges the other dimensions, Epstein

develops a latent cinema manifesto. Film's role is to reveal the truth. Bergson's aspiration to raise the soul above the idea evolves in the passion of Epstein to help subconscious cognition emerge (interior psychological truth). Since the photogenic quality, based on movement simultaneity and rapid velocity, engages the spectator's emotional response, then film should have the mission of liberating the fatigued spectator from cerebral work. Cinema is compared to incarnate passion, freed from prejudices and morality, seeing in the world what we cannot see anymore.

"Film is an illogical chain of events without resolution or climax."⁶ It is a situation without order, beginning, middle or end, a representation of subjective experience. Thus, man's interior life is revealed in cinema better than in any other art. The "photogénie", penetrating the appearances and grasping the essential momentary unity of the objects, elicits the viewer's subconscious response. Because the message is emotional, cinema is universal and has a revolutionary mission. For Epstein it is a continuation of the perspective of the Renaissance and the French Revolution. It is a democratic language because emotion and vision are common and unifying human mediums. The film's deontology is to establish a philosophy of fluidity which he develops in "The Cinema of a Devil."⁷ Cinema is seen as revolutionary — hostile to stability of any kind, destructive of a presumed order, and fighting against reason, which is but another version of declining religious absolutism. Cinema, embodied as a Devil, innovates, deals with the irrational, the dream, personifies mobility within life and ultimately destroys the permanence of the divine identity, "I am." Cinema is a new dynamic. Finally, it has a social use, to function as a therapeutic medicine for individual and social tension. Epstein suggests that the constraints of society generate neurosis and violence. The viewing of a film is described as hypnosis or the

ingestion of a drug, discharging the spectator's tension.

Besides this cinematic ontology which borders on a deontology, Epstein distinguishes other film types, like the commercial, the cinema as a school of treachery and as a theatrical heritage...His intention is not to provide a general ontology including these films, because in his viewpoint they do not constitute an art.

V. Conclusion

This paper intends to clarify some fundamental aspects of Epstein's film theory. Another work can focus on his aesthetic theory or his practical concerns, such as the critique of the narratives, rhythmic editing as it is compared to a song or a poem, the significance of the accelerated montage, or the photogenic quality of the closeups. We can also find in his film theory a distinction of the cinema from the traditional arts, critiques on the French, American and German cinema, concerns with acting, analytic decoupage, the "non-cinematic" long shot, camera movements, the audience, intertitles, sound, the screen and the movie theater. These cinematographic properties emanate, according to Epstein, from the technical possibilities of the machine. The "cinématographe" is presented as so powerful a technology that the film director becomes invisible. The cinematic vision or truth is derived from the superiority of the machine. This viewpoint can be criticized, but the latest evolution of film to a multimedia art (contemporary technological devices such as videos, computers, etc., used in cinema) makes our criticism more flexible concerning Epstein's speculations on the medium.

Another paper could concentrate on the evaluation of his film theory. It would not only examine the credibility or the validity of his approach, but it would also involve a critical exploration of the theoretical models used by

contemporary film theorists in order to evaluate Epstein's theory. For Dudley Andrew, Epstein does not systematically organize his ideas and provide clearly expressed propositions. Andrew observes that Epstein rarely uses examples to clarify his theoretical constructs.⁸ David Bordwell thinks that the French Impressionists do not give a model of theory but a series of imprecise ideas whose anti-intellectual and mystical assumptions remain unexamined. Bordwell adds that general concepts such as rhythm are inadequately defined and that the theories of the Impressionists are scattered unsupported pronouncements, fragmentary aesthetic claims having little acquaintance with systematic philosophy and pursuing specific polemical and artistic goals which often provide slogans instead of positions.⁹ Liebman doubts the credibility of an emotional way of thinking and of cognition as it is presented by Epstein. He finds Epstein condensed and allusive rather than explicit and programmatic. It is also mentioned that Epstein improvises philosophical and psychological views in order to justify the Avant-Garde cinema.¹⁰ Andrew, Bordwell and Liebman agree that Epstein's film theory derives from a literary and philosophical context which enables him to establish a distinct film theory. Noel Carroll proposes a model to interpret Epstein's film theory: 1) role of the cinema, 2) determining features, 3) cinematic strategies.¹¹

These contemporary film theorists use a systematic structural approach to examining a film theory according to a certain epistemological model: 1) the postulates, if there are any, must be clearly pronounced, 2) the hypotheses must be verified by facts, 3) the combination of basic and secondary positions must provide a clear, coherent, systematic, well-founded theory. The next step is to examine how representative and general this theoretical construct is. Since it is difficult for a film theory to assimilate all the cinematic varieties (to include all the different aesthetic, technological, national or temporal cinematic

sources), structuralism intervenes. Its contribution is to reveal the fundamental structures and levels that determine the ontological and aesthetical features of a film theory. Epstein's film theory does not fulfill these requirements and, thus, cannot be considered a systematic structural approach. The ambition to present a personal evaluation of Epstein's film theory can be satisfied only by starting another paper, which can be entitled "An Account of Epstein's Film Theory". It would have been superficial to reduce my approach within this conclusion by general statements such as an Avant-Garde theorist with a poetic state of mind, or a prospective theory of a mechanical art superior to the previous human arts. I consider that the systematic model is not appropriate to analyze Epstein's film theory because Epstein never intended to be systematic. Nor would I suggest a positive optimistic approach which tends to justify Epstein's film theory.

The marginal and complex character of Epstein's film theory requires a flexible and comprehensive method of understanding. Since the systematic and structural model is borrowed from the methodology applied in the human sciences and philosophy, it implies a multi-dimensional scientific approach to the cinema. The contemporary question on cinema's nature: is it a distinct art or a multimedia?, invites new hesitations as to the use of a systematic approach which tends to establish a transcendent macro-theory. Perhaps the development of different micro-theories is more modest in order to interpret the various and evolving nature of the cinema. Speaking about the theorists such as Arnheim, the French Impressionists, Kuleshov, Vertov, Eisenstein and so on, we can observe the significance of cultural, national, historic, aesthetic and technological determinations which are factors that contradict the unanimity of the general systematic film theory. Instead of eliminating the early theorists, it is better to regard their work as micro-film theories.

Notes

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3. Ibid. p.332.
4. Ibid. p.359.
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